PHASE I REPORT:

A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN KENTUCKY

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Phase I Report: A Preliminary Investigation of Alternative Education Programs in Kentucky

Abstract: The growth of the at-risk population is a national problem. Research indicates that prevention and intervention strategies available to these youth vary among schools and states across America. A strategy that is used successfully with at-risk youth is alternative education programs. In Kentucky, every school district has developed an alternative education program that provides academic and non-academic support for these troubled youth.

In Kentucky, the first phase in an attempt toward aligning regular school standards and indicators to improve alternative education programs began in 2001. To accomplish this goal, a preliminary investigation is being conducted by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Center for School Safety. The purpose of this investigation is to devise an instrument consisting of research-based standards and indicators and to use this instrument to evaluate alternative education programs.   Evidence obtained indicates that alternative education programs can be evaluated using research-based standards and indicators. Additional evidence indicates that the results obtained from an evaluation of **individual** programs in respect to standards, indicators, and **total** program performance can be used to improve alternative education programs and student outcomes.

Standards and Indicators Associated with Regular Schools

A review of the literature related to school quality revealed that a limited amount of research is devoted to identifying standards/indicators to evaluate regular schools. Fizpatrick, K. A. (1998) in conjunction with the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) discussed the following indicators of school quality: (a) Culture of Continuous Improvement and Learning, (b) Community-Building, (c) Leadership, (d) Educational Agenda: Beliefs, Mission and Goals, (e) Curriculum, (f) Instruction, and (g) Assessment. These NSSE indicators were used as a resource during the development of the alternative education program evaluation instrument.

The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) standards and indicators. were the primary source used to develop the evaluation instrument and evaluate the alternative education programs. These standards and indicators are part of Kentucky's movement toward academic proficiency for all schools and students by 2014. KDE standards and indicators are grouped into three domains; Academic Performance (curriculum, assessment, instruction), Learning Environment (culture, support, professional development), and Efficiency (leadership, resources/structure/organization, planning). Each standard has approximately ten corresponding indicators (Appendix 1).

Standards and Indicators Associated with Alternative Education Programs

Research conducted on the use of standards to evaluate alternative education programs is virtually non-existent. As a result, regular school research-based standards and indicators were used for this study, because regular school student outcomes (i.e., achievement, attendance, dropout, retention, transition to adult life) are often linked to the academic and non-academic performance of students attending alternative education programs. A comparison of regular school and alternative education program data is reported in Chart 1.

Chart 1

**Comparison of Regular School and Alternative Education in Kentucky
Academic and Non-Academic Data
State Three Year Average – 1999 – 2000 – 2001**

Regular Schools	Academic Index	Attendance Rate*	Dropout Rate*	Retention Rate*	Transition To Adult Life
Elementary	66.5	94.17	-	3.63	-
Middle	62.3	94.17	2.96	3.63	-
High	62.1	94.17	2.96	3.63	95.27
Alternative Programs	**Academic Index**	**Attendance Rate**	**Dropout Rate**	**Retention Rate**	**Transition To Adult Life**
Elementary	28.4	76.19	-	12.51	-
Middle	25.8	76.19	26.8	12.51	-
High	34.4	76.19	26.8	12.51	91.89

* Non-academic rates for attendance, dropout, and retention are the same for all levels because they are the **state** averages of all schools .

These data reveal approximately a thirty percent (30%) difference between the academic performance of regular schools and alternative education programs. The attendance data indicates an approximate difference between regular schools and alternative education programs of twenty percent (20%). The dropout rate difference between regular schools and alternative education programs is approximately twenty-three percent (23%). The retention rate difference is approximately nine percent (9%). The transition rate difference between regular high schools and alternative education high schools is approximately four percent (4%).

Chart I reveals that the academic and non-academic performance of students attending alternative education programs is significantly poorer than regular schools. To improve student outcomes, it is imperative that alternative education programs receive a comprehensive evaluation. This study reports the results of an evaluation of individual program, standard, indicator, and total program performance using a standards-based instrument.

Prior to this investigation, it was apparent that the nine (9) KDE standards and many of the indicators could be used to evaluate alternative education programs, however, additional indicators like behavior management, social skill development, and individualized instruction were needed. A review of alternative education literature was conducted to identify specific research-based systems and strategies. Tobin and Sprague (1999) reported a summary of research-based strategies that included: (1) low ratio of students to teachers, (2) highly structured classroom with behavioral management, (3) positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management, (4) adult mentors, (5) individualized behavioral interventions, (6) social skill instruction, and (7) high-quality academic instruction. These indicators were embedded among the nine (9) KDE standards and included in the instrument used to evaluate the alternative education programs.

Identifying and Evaluating Alternative Education Programs

A comprehensive and effective alternative education program must use best-practice prevention and intervention strategies to improve program and student performance. This study defines strategies as **standards** for evaluation purposes.

Standards:

1. 1. **Curriculum –** Rigorous, intentional, and aligned curriculum is used and meets state and local standards.

2. 2. **Assessment –** Multiple evaluation and assessment strategies are used to continuously monitor and modify instruction to meet student needs and support proficient student work.

3. 3. **Instruction** – All students are engaged by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to improve student academic performance.

4. 4. **Culture** – An effective learning community supports a climate conducive to performance excellence.

5. **5. Student, Family, and Community Support** – Families and community groups work together to remove barriers to learning in an effort to meet the intellectual, social, career, and developmental needs of students.

6. **Professional Development, Professional Growth and Evaluation** – Research-based and results driven professional development opportunities for staff and performance evaluation procedures are used to improve teaching and learning.

7. **Leadership** – Instructional decisions focus on support for teaching and learning, organizational direction, high performance expectations, creating a learning culture, and developing leadership capacity.

6. **6. Organizational Structure and Resources** – Maximum use of all available resources to support high student and staff performance exists.

7. **7. Comprehensive and Effective Planning** – Develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive improvement plan that communicates a clear purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning.

Method

This investigation was conducted as a pilot effort to evaluate sixty-six (66) alternative education programs. These programs were selected because they are part of an annual review process conducted by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Center for School Safety. The programs were reviewed by seven (7) retired alternative education specialists using a standards-based instrument consisting of nine (9) standards and fifty-eight (58) corresponding indicators (Appendix 2).

Prior to the program reviews, the specialists received standard/indicator training and were taught how to use the evaluation instrument. The alternative education specialists were assigned seven (7) programs located in their respective regions and asked to contact school district superintendents and program coordinators to schedule a one-day site review. During the reviews, the specialist visited classrooms, observed teachers, interviewed students/staff, and reviewed evidence (i.e., data, lesson plans, curriculum) to support his/her findings.

Procedures

In addition to the training given to the alternative education specialists prior to the site-visits, they received training on how to use the evaluation instrument to rate the indicators and standards. This process is described in the following sections:

1. 1. **Indictors/Evidence** – The specialists were asked to rate each standard's indicators using a (no/partial/yes) rubric. This rubric was later converted to a numeric rating scale of (0, 1, 2).

2. 2. **Standard Performance Level** – The specialists were asked to rate each of the nine (9) standards based on their indicator ratings. A rating scale from (1/low to 5/high) was used.

3. **Comments** – The specialists were asked to make comments about the standards and/or indicators that supported their findings.

Design and Data Analysis

Data were collected from each specialist during the 2000-2001 school year. A descriptive statistics design was used to obtain scores for individual programs, standards, and indicators. The sample consisted of sixty-six (66) programs, nine (9) standards, and fifty-eight (58) indicators.

To evaluate the performance of the programs, the following data were analyzed after the alternative education program reviews were completed: (1) Individual Program Performance (IPP); (2) Individual Standard Performance (ISP); (3) Individual Indicator Performance (IIP); (4) Total Standard Performance Level (TSPL) and; (5) Total Performance Index (TPI).

While the primary purpose of this investigation was to develop an evaluation instrument consisting of research-based standards and indicators, specific research questions pertaining to **individual** program, standard, and indicator performance and **total** program performance were considered. These research questions include:

1. 1. What percent of the programs received mean scores below 2.00, above 4.00, and scores between 2.01 and 3.99 when using research-based standards and indicators? (Appendix 3)

2. What are the means and standard deviations of each standard? (Appendix 4)

1. 1. Which standards received mean scores below 2.00, above 4.00, and
   scores between 2.01 and 3.99? (Appendix 4)

2. 2. Which three (3) standards received the highest means scores? (Appendix 4)

3. 3. Which three (3) standards received the lowest mean scores? (Appendix 4)

4. 4. What was the mean score for the lowest three standards? (Appendix 4)

5. 5. Which indicators received the highest mean score for the three (3) lowest standards? (Appendix 5a, 5B, & 5c)

6. 6. Which indicators received the lowest mean score for the three (3) lowest standards? (Appendix 5a, 5b, & 5c)

7. 7. What was the total standard performance level from 1.00 to 5.00 for all sixty-six (66) programs? (Appendix 6)

8. 8. What was the total performance index from 1 to 100 for all sixty-six (66) programs? (Appendix 6)

Results

Individual **Program** Performance (IPP) – **Table 1** indicates that twelve (12) percent of the programs received mean scores below 2.00. Thirty-eight (38) percent of the programs received mean scores above 4.00. Fifty (50) percent of the programs received mean scores between 2.01 and 3.99 percent. The results suggest an equal performance distribution among the sixty-six (66) alternative education programs. A majority of the programs thirty-three (33) received ratings between 2.01 and 3.99, twelve (12) programs received ratings below 2.00, and twenty-five (25) programs received ratings above 4.00 (Appendix 3).

Table 1: Individual Program Performance (IPP) n = 66 programs

Programs **Below** 2.00	Programs **Between** 2.01and 3.99	Programs **Above** 4.00
12%	50%	38%

Individual **Standard** Performance (ISP) – **Tables 2a** reveals the means and standard deviations for each of the nine (9) standards. The standards ranged between 2.98 and 3.69. Assessment was rated the lowest standard and culture was rated the highest standard (Appendix 4).

Table 2a: Individual Standard Performance (IPP) n = 9

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Standards	Means	Standard Deviation
Assessment	2.98	1.24
Curriculum	3.03	1.14
Instruction	3.07	1.24
Support	3.46	1.26
PD	3.48	1.30
Organization	3.54	1.29
Leadership	3.62	1.33
Planning	3.66	1.08
Culture	3.69	1.14

Table 2b reveals that none of the standard mean scores was below 2.00 or above 4.00. Scores ranged between 2.98 and 3.69 percent. The median for all nine (9) standards was 3.48. These data suggest an equal distribution among all sixty-six (66) programs.

Table 2b: Individual Standard Performance (ISP) n = 9 standards

Standards **Below** 2.00	Standards **Between** 2.01 and 3.99	Standards **Above** 4.00
0%	100%	0%

Table 2c represents the three (3) standards receiving the highest mean scores - leadership (3.62), planning (3.66), and culture (3.69).

Table 2c: Individual Standard Performance (ISP) n = Highest (3) Standards

Leadership	Planning	Culture
3.62	3.66	3.69

Table 2d represents the three (3) standards receiving the lowest mean scores - curriculum (3.03) assessment (2.98), and instruction (3.07).

Table 2d: Individual Standard Performance (ISP) n = Lowest (3) Standards

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Assessment	Curriculum	Instruction
2.98	3.03	3.07

Table 2e represents the median for curriculum, assessment, and instruction - 3.03 percent.

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Table 2e: Individual Standard Performance (ISP) n = 3 standards

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Curriculum – Assessment - Instruction
3.03

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Individual **Indicator** Performance Scores (IIP) – **Tables 3a & 3b** represent mean scores for curriculum, assessment, and instruction indicators. Six (6) curriculum indicators ranged between 1.07 and 1.59 percent. Four (4) assessment indicators ranged between 1.09 and 1.27 percent. Six (6) instruction indicators ranged between 1.10 and 1.40.

The highest curriculum indicators were aligned with Core Content/ Program of Studies (1.59) and discussions take place among staff (1.39). The highest assessment indicators were frequent, rigorous, and aligned and multiple assessment feedback (1.27). The highest instruction indicators were strategies/activities aligned with goals and highly structured classrooms (1.40).

The lowest curriculum indicators were process to monitor, evaluate, and review curriculum (1.07) and linked to continuing education, life, and career options (1.10). The lowest assessment indicators were collaboration in the design of assessments (1.09) and individual behavior assessments are based on functional assessments (1.21). The lowest instruction indicators were high-quality academic instruction (1.10) and varied instructional strategies are used (1.30).   8

These results may be used by program administrators and staff to reinforce high standards/indicators and improve low standards/indicators.

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Table 3a: Individual Indicator Performance (IIP) – Highest Mean Scores
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Standards	Indicators	Rating
Curriculum	Aligned with Core Content and Program of Studies	1.59
	Discussions take place among all staff	1.39
Assessment	Frequent, rigorous, and aligned	1.27
	Multiple assessments provide feedback on learning	1.27
Instruction	Strategies/activities aligned with goals	1.40
	Highly structured classrooms with behavior management	1.40

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Table 3b: Individual Indicator Performance (IIP) – Lowest Mean Scores
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Standards	Indicators	Rating
Curriculum	Process to monitor, evaluate, and review curriculum	1.07
	Linked to continuing education, life, and career options	1.10
Assessment	Teachers collaborate in assessment design	1.09
	Individual behavior assessments are based on functional assessments	1.21
Instruction	High-quality academic instruction has value, Meaning, and relevance	1.10
	Varied instructional strategies are used	1.30
	Strategies are monitored and aligned to address instruction	1.30

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Total Standard Performance Level (TSPL) – **Table 4** reveals a mean of 3.33 out of 5.00. This score represents the total standard mean for all sixty-six (66) programs included in this study.

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Table 4: Total Standard Performance Level (TSPL) n = 66
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Mean = 3.33

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Total Performance Index (TPI) – **Table 5** reveals a mean of 70.9. This score represents the total program performance index for all for all sixty-six (66) programs included in this study.

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Table 5: Total Performance Index (TPI) n = 66
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Mean = 70.9

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Discussion

The growth of the at-risk population is a national problem that requires the use of specific prevention and intervention strategies. A strategy that research indicates to be beneficial is alternative education programs. The results of this current investigation indicates that alternative education programs can be developed, implemented, and evaluated using research-based standards and indicators. This study used nine standards and 58 indicators to evaluate **individual** program, standard, and indicator performance, and the **total** performance level and index of 66 alternative education programs.

This preliminary investigation of alternative education programs suggests that an evaluation instrument consisting of researched-based standards and indicators may be an effective tool to use when evaluating alternative education programs. Data obtained using the instrument can be used to:

1. 1. Identify program strengths.
2. 2. Identify standards and indicators requiring improvement.
3. 3. Develop professional development options.
4. 4. Develop staff individual growth plans.
5. 5. Improve student outcomes.

6. 6.   Report program performance and its relationship to student outcomes.

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Appendices